

## 67-year-old Port Lavaca causeway burns

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PORT LAVACA -- Flames lit the sky early Friday morning as a large portion of one of Port Lavaca's most famous landmarks went up in smoke.

About a third of what was once known as the world's longest fishing pier smoldered throughout the day as firefighters stood by.

After the burning creosoted planks were separated from the remaining 2,000 feet of pier closest to shore, firefighters said there was little they could do but watch the fire burn itself out. Shallow water kept them from getting their boat near enough to fight the blaze, which may have been started by lightning.

At 3:45 a.m., 911 dispatchers received a mobile phone call. The message was ``the pier's on fire." The caller was Randy Maddox of Seadrift, an electrical engineer with Union Carbide. He had spotted the fire as he traveled north on the state Highway 35 causeway.

``I looked out at the lights on the fishing pier thinking to myself, `I bet nobody's out fishing,' then I did a double-take . . . the dang pier's on fire." At the time, he said, it wasn't raining, ``but a real good lightning show was going on."

He said the pier was on fire on top and bottom in a line extending two or three feet across the width of the narrow pier.

``It was in a straight line, not wide -- like you poured gasoline on it and lighted it."

He said the pier's lights were working on both sides of the fire.

Maddox said he was surprised when he returned in the afternoon to see the end of the pier burning.

``It was like they stopped it from going one way, but couldn't do anything to stop it the other way," he said.

Fire Marshal Rob Thigpen said no determination has been made on what started the fire and he will continue to investigate.

``All evidence we needed burned up and is underwater," said firefighter Wade McCauley. ``They suspect lightning, but maybe we'll never know."

Built in 1931, the structure was the first causeway over Lavaca Bay. It linked Port Lavaca and Point Comfort and spared motorists from having to travel 80 or 90 miles to get from one side of the bay to other, a distance of six miles directly across.

But hurricanes in 1935 and 1942 damaged the causeway so badly that weights were limited and many vehicles were back to making the long circuit from Point Comfort to Edna and Victoria to get to Port Lavaca.

By 1944, according to historians, the causeway was rebuilt and there was a grand celebration.

For the first time, the bridge could bear the weight of military trucks and shorten the trip for troops traveling from Camp Hulen in Palacios to military training grounds in Indianola.

With a blimp overhead and Navy ships in the harbor on that Fourth of July, Texas Gov. Coke Stevenson was one of many dignitaries on hand to watch the troop trucks roll across the rebuilt causeway.

The causeway served until 1961, when the new four-lane state Highway 35 causeway was built.

In 1962, the old causeway became the Port Lavaca State Fishing Pier and was acknowledged as the world's longest. It was lighted for night fishing in 1964.

When Hurricane Carla slammed into the coast in 1961, the pier sustained heavy damage and was shortened considerably.

City Manager Tom Blazek said the end of the unburned portion of the pier has been barricaded and can be used by fishermen.

``It's as sound as it ever was," he said.

It was not clear late Friday whether the state-owned pier is insured. The city leases the pier for \$1 a year from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in a contract that ends in 2001, Blazek said.

- **Caption:** Roger Curtner/Advocate Chief Photographer Much of the old causeway across Lavaca Bay was burned Friday, possibly having been hit by lightning. Built in 1931, it wa the first causeway over Lavaca Bay, linking Point Comfort and Port Lavaca. In 1962, it became the world's longest fishing pier.
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